

"Out Standing In Our Field"

Ken Barry
Broker
705-754-5280
ken@kenbarry.com

Jacquie Barry
Realtor®
705-457-0652
jacquie@kenbarry.com

www.kenbarry.com

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CountyLife

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JULY 27, 2023

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Where is the Whip-poor-will?
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pages 2 and 3.

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on pages 4 and 5.



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Naturally Yours



Whip-poor-wills remain still and well camouflaged during the daylight hours. /Photo by Ed Poropat

Where is the Whip-poor-will?

RICK WHITTEKER

Special to *County Life*

Comfy chairs and couches greeted participants in the Where is the Whip-poor-will? program on Sunday, July 2. As the setting sun slanted through the barn board cracks, this rustic space set the perfect stage for a group of nature enthusiasts to come together to learn. With hosts Dave and Cheryl Bathe welcoming guests to their property deep in the back forty of Gelert, this unique property was the setting for an evening of education and entertainment.

With twilight slowly fading, a Wood Thrush serenaded the group gathered inside the Bathe’s historical barn, adding ambiance to the evening presentation which included other interesting surprises. Who could have guessed that the Eastern Whip-poor-will along with other crepuscular or night flying birds have the nickname “goatsuckers?” Historically, Whip-poor-wills and their European equivalent Nightjars spent a lot of time around grazing goats at night. With the ability to open their mouths very wide, legend has it that they also suckled goat’s udder, hence the odd name.

The advantage of the Whip-poor-will’s large mouth is in capturing flying insects, mostly moths and beetles. Preferring to hunt on well lit nights, a conscious choice was made to offer the program under a full moon. Like

many nocturnal animals, the Whip-poor-will has a reflective membrane at the back of their eyes, called the tapetum lucidum. It acts like a mirror reflecting light back to the retina, helping with night vision. Driving at night, if you see the green glare of a roadside animal’s “eye shine”, it is often a deer or raccoon. If you capture with your flashlight a set of small red eyes flying at night, you have spotted a Whip-poor-will as their eye shine is red.

Wonderfully camouflaged while at rest during the day, their night hunting flight pattern is characteristically very erratic. Whip-poor-wills are also known for their insistent nighttime call, sounding like they are calling their own name. It is very repetitive, as one participant said after hearing them call, “they hardly stopped to even take a breath!” Bathe noted that they sometimes call all night long ... just outside his bedroom window. Remarkably he delivers this information with a smile!

Bathe informed the group that a couple of large fires in 1913 and 1949 in the area near his property resulted in conditions that suit the Whip-poor-will. The ideal habitat includes the cover of forests during the day and open meadows and rocky barrens for hunting at night.

However, the call of the Eastern Whip-poor-will has become less frequent over recent decades; it is designated as a threatened species in Ontario and Canada. One person who knows this all too well is Thom Lambert.

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CountyLife

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